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The changes in population and the areas of habitation of Poles in the territory of the Lithuanian republic during the 20th century

MUZEUM HISTORII POLSKI

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According to the census taken in 1923, 2 029 000 people lived in the Republic of Lithuania. Among them 1 701 900 (83.9%) were Lithuanians, 153 700 (7.6%) Jews, 65 600 (3.2%) Poles, 50 500 (2%) Russians, 29 200 (1.4%) Germans, and 28 100 (1.4%) belonged to other nationalities[1]. The Polish government did not recognise the result of this census, claiming that the Lithuanian authorities intimidated minority groups and forced them to declare their nationality as Lithuanian. As a counteraction, Polish statisticians took into account the number of votes given for representatives of particular nationalities in a general election, this way calculating the numbers of inhabitants belonging to ethnic groups. Estimated this way, Lithuania was inhabited by 1 550 100 (76.4%) Lithuanians, 202 000 (9.9%) Poles, 181 800 (9%) Jews, 44 500 (2.2 %) Germans, 42 600 (2.1%) Russians, and 7 500 (0.4 %) Latvians[2]. These results, just like any other estimated calculations, were not completely accurate. However, they indicated that the figures given in the census did not correspond to the real numbers of people belonging to the nationality groups.

In the Wilno area, being a part of Poland at that time and not incorporated into Lithuania until the turn of 1939/1940, the last pre-war census was taken in 1931. The nationalities living there were 377 400 (69.1%) Poles, 68 800 (12.6%) Jews, 61 700 (11.3%) Lithuanians, 15 300 (2.8%) Belorussians, 10 000 (1.8%) Russians, and 12 900 (2.4%)[3] inhabitants belonging to other minority groups. Altogether, 546 100 people lived in the Wilno area at that time. Taking into account all the above numbers, Piotr Eberhardt evaluates that at the turn of 1938/1939 the number of people living in all areas now belonging to Lithuania was 3 037 100. Among them 2 098 600 (69.1%) were Lithuanians, 464 700 (15.3%) Poles, 249 000 (8.2%) Jews, 103 300 (3.4%) Germans, 72 900 (2.4%) Russians, 18 200 (0.6%) Latvians, 6 100 (0.2%) Belarussians, and 24 300 (0.8%)[4] people belonging to other nationalities.

After the outbreak of the 2nd World War, which started when Germany invaded Poland on 1st September 1939, the structure of the population of

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[1] P. Eberhardt, *Między Rosją a Niemcami*, Warszawa 1996, p. 42.
[2] P. Eberhardt, *Przemiany narodowościowe na Litwie*, Warszawa 1997, p. 99-101.
[3] P. Eberhardt, *Między Rosją...*, p. 43.
[4] P. Eberhardt, *Przemiany narodowościowe na Litwie*, Warszawa..., p. 129.

Lithuania changed considerably. Moreover, the political status of the country was changed several times. As said above, before the 2nd World War the Wilno area belonged to Poland while the rest was independent Lithuania, but from 19th September to 12th October the territory of Lithuania was occupied by Russia. Consequently, the country was incorporated into the Soviet Union, becoming The Lithuanian Soviet Republic. Between June 1941 and July 1944 the area was occupied by Germany, and then it again became a part of Soviet Union. As a result, some inhabitants emigrated, others were deported abroad or moved from one part of the country to another, mainly settling in Kowno and the Wilno areas. Leonas Sabaliunas, a Lithuanian writer on this subject, presents demographic changes in the Wilno area at the turn of 1939/1940 as follows: the total number of population was 549 000, out of this 321 700 (58.6%) people were Poles, 107 600 (19.6%) Jews, 775 200 (13.7%) Belarussians, 31 100 (5.7%) Lithuanians, 9 900 (1.8%) Russians, 1 100 (0.2%) Germans, and 2 200 (0.4%) people were of other nationalities. The population of the Wilno area constituted 20% of the population of the whole of Lithuania[5].

     After the outbreak of the 2nd World War, the first census in the country was taken by the German authorities on 27th May 1942. Klajpeda, belonging before to Lithuania, was now excluded from the census because it had become a part of the German Reich. However, people living in Oszmiana area and Świr, at present belonging to Belarussia, took part in the census. According to that census the country was inhabited by 2 789 600 people, out of them 2 264 000 (81.1%) were Lithuanians, 336 900 (12.1%) Polish, 85 500 (3.1%) Russians, 82 300 (2.9%) Belarussians, 8 800 (0.3%) Latvians, 4 500 (0.2%) Germans, and 7 600 (0.3%)[6] belonged to other nationalities. But yet the German occupiers did not count two groups as inhabitants: Polish refugees coming from other areas of Poland and Jews while at the same time Russian prisoners of war were counted[7]. This way, the census was not reliable. Moreover, in the 1942 census the number of people declaring Polish nationality fell by 127 800 in comparison with the figures from 1939, quoted above after Eberhardt. During the same period, the number of Lithuanians rose by 165 400. Naturally, the territorial changes of the country during those three years caused some changes in the number of nationalities, but could not have caused such radical transformation. In the territory of pre-war Lithuania the number of Poles went down by over 53 000, that is by 82% when compared with 1923 census. That would indicate that some minorities were forced to declare different nationalities to their real ones, or that the census was not taken properly[8].

     The outcome of the 1942 census was verified during the resettlement action of 1945-1947 when 379 498 people wanted to move to Poland, thus acknowledging their Polish nationality, although not all Poles would or could enlist for resettlement because of the formal requirements. For example, those

[5] P. Łossowski, *Litwa a sprawy Polskie* 1939-1940, Warszawa 1985, p. 56.
[6] P. Eberhardt, *Przemiany narodowościowe na Litwie*, Warszawa..., p. 129.
[7] G. Juodpusis, *Polacy na Litwie w latach 1939-1990*, [w:] *Białoruś, Czechosłowacja, Litwa, Polska, Ukraina. Mniejszości w świetle spisów statystycznych XIX-XX w.*, red. J. Skarbek, Lublin 1996, p. 59.
[8] P. Eberhardt, *Przemiany narodowościowe na Litwie*, Warszawa..., p. 157.

who declared membership of the Orthodox Church could not apply for emigration while married couples were often allowed to emigrate only when the husband was of Polish nationality[9]. In spite of all those restrictions 42 598 people enlisted for emigration to Poland, more than had declared Polish nationality in the German census. Leaving out Jews and other nationalities on the emigration lists, there were still 23 256 Polish people unaccounted for in the census of 1942. Furthermore, for obvious reasons, the census of 1942 did not take into account people in prisons, the deported, soldiers, those who left the country illegally, as well as victims of the war and persecution, including those who were forced to work in Germany. The estimated number of people, mostly Polish, sent from Lithuania to Germany was 70 000[10].

Due to the resettlements after the war, organised in the 1940s and in the 1950s, 243 708 people left the country. Besides, people were still persecuted and deported to other parts of the Soviet Union. In this situation, in 1959, a new census was taken in all the Soviet republics. According to it, 2711 400 people lived in Lithuania, including 2150 800 (79.3%) Lithuanians, 231 000 (8.5%) Russians, 230 100 (8.5%) Poles, 30 300 (1.1%) Belarussians, 24 700 (0.9%) Jews, 17 700 (0.6%) Ukrainians, 6 300 (0.3%) Latvians, 3 000 (0.2%) Tatars and 17 500 (0.6%) people of other nationalities[11].

The above results, compared with the estimated figures concerning 1938/1939, showed that the number of Poles decreased by at least 234 600, that is 50% of all Polish people living in Lithuania before the war. Surprisingly enough, 13 444 people declaring Lithuanian nationality responded that their mother tongue was Polish. Moreover, nearly 600 Tatars confirmed that their first language was Polish. Among the Polish minority 3 600 people declared themselves speakers of Lithuanians as their first language, whereas 3 000 Poles admitted speaking Russian, and 800 spoke other languages[12]. The 1959 census also showed that the fastest growing nationality group were Belarussians, the number of whom rose by 24 200, that is by 396.7%. That growth was mainly the result of the resettlement of people from Belarussia to the areas left by those who emigrated to Poland. This rise was also due to the fact that some Polish people were assigned to Belarussian nationality, sometimes contrary to their will[13]. That process of

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[9] Ibid., p. 169.

[10] G. Błaszczyk, *Litwa współczesna*, Warszawa-Poznań 1992, p. 111.

[11] P. Eberhardt, *Przemiany narodowościowe na Litwie*, Warszawa..., p. 184. Tadeusz Walichnowski maintains that the number of Poles was 230 000. This may be the result of rounding off. T. Walichnowski, *ZSRR rozwój i międzynarodowe znaczenie*, Warszawa 1977, p. 284.

[12] P. Eberhardt, *Przemiany narodowościowe na Litwie*, Warszawa..., p. 188-189.

[13] R. Dzwonkowski, *Problem liczebności Polaków i katolików obrządku łacińskiego na Białorusi i Ukrainie*, [w:] *Mniejszości narodowe i religijne w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w świetle statystyk XIX i XX wieku*, red. Z. Sułowski, J. Skarbek, Lublin 1995, p. 145-146; L. Mróz, *Problemy etniczne w Litwie Wschodniej*, „Przegląd Wschodni", t. I., z. 3. 1991, p. 494-495; J. Kuśmierz, *Między „Wschodem" a „Zachodem". Stosunki etniczne na Wileńszczyźnie w wypowiedziach jej mieszkańców*, „Przegląd Wschodni", t. I., z. 3. 1991, p. 507-508, 521; M. Jackiewicz, *O fałszywych wpisach w dowodach osobistych*, „Czerwony Sztandar", 25 października 1989; M. Skrobatun, *Jak pokonać biurokrację?*, ibid.; E Łastowski, *Wynaradawianie na Wileńszczyźnie*, „Orzeł Biały", czerwiec 1999; A. Srebrakowski, *Polacy w Litewskiej SRR 1944-1989*, Toruń 2000, p. 121. Besides, during his trips around Lithuania the author met a group or Poles who had Belarussian nationality written into their identity cards.

enforcing another nationality upon the minority groups was particularly frequent on both sides of the border with Belarussia. This way the authorities wanted to divide the homogenous Polish population in both neighbouring republics[14]. As the result of persecution, deportation, resettlement, and forcing Poles to change their nationality, the percentage of Polish people living in the covered by present-day Lithuania territory diminished from 15.3% to 8.5% during 20 years, from 1939 to 1959.

The 1959 census indicated that Polish people lived mainly in rural areas, with 70% of them living there. In the whole country, Poles constituted 9.7% of the population in the rural areas and 6.5% in the cities[15]. The number of Polish people fell in the territory of pre-war Lithuania whereas in the area belonging to Poland before the war they made up a considerable part of the whole population, although the area where the Poles were in the majority diminished. The Wilno area was divided into 14 districts in four of which Poles were in the majority, with more than 50 % of the whole population. 23 615 of them lived in Soleczniki district, which was 83.87% of the total number of people, 48 710 (81.44%) in Wilno district, 27 301 (73.21%) in Niemenczyn district, and 13 835 (67.40%) in Ejszyszki district. Furthermore, the Polish people were in the majority, making up less than 50% of the whole population, in Troki district with 16 927 (48.17%) inhabitants[16].

Another census was taken in 1970 when the situation in the country had stabilised; the massive deportations were no longer organised, people were not persecuted as before. All this contributed to the growth in the number of population by 416 800 (15.4%), to 3 128 200. The nationality structure of the population was as follows: 2 506 700 (80.1%) Lithuanians, 267 900 (8.6%) Russians, 240 200 (7.7%) Poles, 45 400 (1.3%) Belarussians, 25 100 (0.8%) Ukrainians, 23 600 (0.8%) Jews, and 19 300 (0.7%) belonging to other nationalities[17]. But despite the growth in the number of Poles by 10 100 (4.4%), the share of Polish nationality in the society fell by 0.8% while the number of Poles whose mother tongue was not Polish rose to 18 300. Out of this number 41.53 % declared Lithuanian, 49.72% Russian, and 8.74% spoke other languages[18]. There were also changes in the place of habitation since more and more Polish people moved to cities and, in effect, the percentage of Poles living in rural areas went down to 60.2%. In the whole country the Polish minority constituted 6.1% of the whole population in the cities and 9.3% of the country population[19]. At the same time, the area where Poles dominated diminished. In the 1960s, due to the new administration division, the Wilno area was divided

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[14] J. Porzecki, *Zaczynaliśmy od zera* (an interview written by A. Bobryk), „Kurier Siedlecki", 29 grudnia 1999.
[15] P. Eberhardt, *Przemiany narodowościowe na Litwie*, Warszawa..., p. 184-185.
[16] A. Srebrakowski, *Statystyczny portret Polaków z Litwy (na podstawie oficjalnych danych statystycznych)*, [w:] *Mniejszości narodowe i religijne w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w świetle statystyk XIX i XX wieku*, red. Z. Sułowski, J. Skarbek, Lublin 1995, p. 131.
[17] P. Eberhardt, *Przemiany narodowościowe na Litwie*, „Przegląd Wschodni", t. I., z. 3. 1991, p. 475.
[18] P. Eberhardt, *Przemiany narodowościowe na Litwie*, Warszawa..., p. 199.
[19] Ibid.

into 9 districts, Poles dominated in two of them: in Soleczniki with 83.7% inhabitants, and Wilno with 70.1%[20].

The census taken in 1979 indicated that the number of people living in the republic rose by 8.4%, reaching 3 391 500. Among them 2 712 200 (80%) were Lithuanians, 303 500 (8.9%) Russians, 247 000 (7.3%) Poles, 57 600 (1.8%) Belarussians, 32 000 (0.9%) Ukrainians, 14 700 (0.4%) Jews, and 24 500 (0.7%) belonged to other nationalities[21]. The rate of growth of the number of Poles, being insignificant before, now decreased even more. From 1970 to 1979 the Polish population rose by 6 800, that is 3 300 less than the growth between 1959 and 1970. The population of Poles with a mother tongue different to Polish went up to 28 993. From this group 60.2% declared Russian, 32.9% Lithuanian, and 6.9% other languages[22]. This indicated that the Polish population had a tendency to assimilate to the rest of the society. This was, to some extent, confirmed by the diminishing percentage of the Polish in the districts where they made up majority: in Soleczniki 81.3% inhabitants were Poles, 2.4% less than before, and in Wilno 67.9%, 2.2% less[23]. The percentage of Poles living in the country decreased to 52.2%[24]. This was the result of the fact that Poles were moving to cities from the traditional areas of habitation.

The last census was taken in 1989, two years before the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, and two years before Lithuania became an independent country. The declaration of the restitution of the state was announced on 11th March 1990, and the independence was recognised by the Soviet Union on 5th September 1991. The census indicated that during the previous decade the country underwent modification such as the growth of the sense of national identity among different population groups. In 1989, the year of the census, 3 674 802 people lived in the republic, including 2 924 251 (79.6%) Lithuanians, 344 455 (9.4%) Russians, 257 994 (7%) Polish, 63 169 (1.7%) Belarussians, 44 789 (1.2%) Ukrainians, 12 392 (0.3%) Jews and 27 830 (0.8%) of other nationalities[25]. The census showed that the number of Lithuanians increased by 211 921, the number of Poles by 10 972. At the same time the percentage of Lithuanians, Poles, and Jews went down and the percentage of Russians and Ukrainians went up. The increase in the number of the Polish population between 1979 and 1989 was faster than that in the period between two previous censuses, in 1970 and 1979, when the increase slowed down. Due to this reverse tendency, the Polish population grew 4 172 more in the period 1979-1989 than in 1970--1979. However, there were a growing number of Poles declaring other languages than Polish. Among them 23 800 spoke Russian, 13 000 Lithuanian, and 1 900 spoke other languages[26]. Altogether, in the period between 1979 and 1989 there

[20] Ibid. p. 203.

[21] P. Eberhardt, *Przemiany narodowościowe na Litwie*, „Przegląd Wschodni"..., p. 475-476.

[22] A. Srebrakowski, *Statystyczny portret*..., p. 133.

[23] P. Eberhardt, *Przemiany narodowościowe na Litwie*, Warszawa..., p. 209.

[24] A. Srebrakowski, *Liczba Polaków w ZSRR w świetle oficjalnych statystyk radzieckich*, [w:] *Mniejszości narodowe i religijne w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w świetle statystyk XIX i XX wieku*, red. Z. Sułowski, J. Skarbek, Lublin, 1995, p. 79.

[25] P. Eberhardt, *Przemiany narodowościowe na Litwie*, Warszawa..., p. 213, 232-233.

[26] Ibid., p. 215.

were 9 700 more of those who spoke other languages than Polish. For variety of reasons, mainly because of the fact that people of other nationalities settled there, the number of Poles went down by 1.7% in the Soleczniki region and by 4.4% in the Wilno region. Comparing with the previous period, in the former district the rate of the falling of the number of Poles slowed down while in the latter speeded up. In Soleczniki the less radical fall of the number of Polish people was caused by the firmly established concentration of the Polish minority and by the growth of national identity. The decrease in the Vilnius area was due to the fact that more people of other nationalities settled there, being attracted by better prospects in and near the big city.

Between 1959 and 1989 the number of Poles rose by 27 887 (12.12%) but the percentage of Polish people in the country fell by 1.5%, from 8.5% to 7%. There were two causes for this small growth. Firstly, resettlements to Poland brought about changes in the age groups; mainly young people left the country. Secondly, the assimilation processes became more established[27]. Yet, the official results of the censuses did not cover the whole Polish minority. According to Aleksander Srebrakowski only those with well-established national identity and openly demanding rights for minorities declared themselves as Polish[28]. On the other hand, there was a growing number of people who declared speaking other languages than Polish. This factor rose from 3.2% in 1959 to 15% in 1989[29]. This situation was brought about by a decrease of the areas inhabited by Poles and migration to cities, particularly to Wilno where, interacting in multilingual communities, one had to use languages other than Polish. Because of the linguistic affinity with Polish and administrative importance more people declared Russian rather than Lithuanian, even though the language people speak is not the most important factor of their belonging to a particular nationality[30]. In conclusion, the real cause of the decline of the number of Polish in some areas was due to their migration to other areas and the settlement of Lithuanian and Russian population in the Wilno area[31].

The crucial consideration in this matter is the fact that the administrative boundaries did not match ethnic boundaries[32]. Owing to this, the Poles were dispersed. This process effected in the decrease of the Polish population in the Wilno area, belonging before to Poland, and was incorporated to Lithuania as the result of the 2nd World War. In the territory of pre-war Lithuania those changes were even more radical, causing the shrinkage of the Polish ethnic minority. Out of 35 districts only in 1 did the Poles make up more than 1% of the

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[27] G. Juodpusis, *Polacy na Litwie...*, p. 63.

[28] A. Srebrakowski, *Statystyczny portret...*, p. 120.

[29] Ibid., p. 133.

[30] R. Dzwonkowski, *Polacy na dawnych Kresach Wschodnich. Z problematyki narodowościowej i religijnej*, Lublin 1994, p. 11-12.

[31] P. Eberhardt, *Skład narodowościowy ludności ziemi litewskiej w XX wieku*, [w:] *Mniejszości narodowe i religijne w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w świetle statystyk XIX i XX wieku*, red. Z. Sułowski, J. Skarbek, Lublin 1995, p. 115.

[32] A. Srebrakowski, *Liczba i rozmieszczenie Polaków na Litwie w latach 1919-1989. Przegląd publikacji i źródeł litewskich*, [w:] *Białoruś, Czechosłowacja, Litwa, Polska, Ukraina. Mniejszości w świetle spisów statystycznych XIX i XX w.*, red. J. Skarbek, Lublin 1996, p. 77.

inhabitants. In the Janów district, without a part of this area belonging to pre-war Poland, they constituted 1.7%. Apart from the Wilno area with considerable number of Poles, in the towns being a separate district the biggest group of Polish people lived in Olita, 0.7% of the whole population[33]. This indicates strong assimilation tendency ever present in the situation when the ethnical domination of the group diminishes or when the group is dispersed. In effect, the process of assimilation speeds up.

Adam Bobryk

Streszczenie

W okresie międzywojennym, wg oficjalnych danych, Litwę zamieszkiwało 65,6 tys. (3,2%) Polaków. W tym czasie historyczna stolica Litwy – Wilno, wraz z regionem (Wileńszczyzną) - znajdowała się w granicach Rzeczpospolitej. Na obszarze tym było 377,4 tys. (69,1%) Polaków. Jak szacuje polski demograf Piotr Eberhardt, na przełomie lat 1938/1939 aktualne terytorium Litwy zamieszkiwało 464,7 tys. (15,3%) ludności polskiej.

Sytuacja wojenna wraz z rozpoczęciem konfliktu zbrojnego między Polską a Niemcami w dniu 1 września 1939 roku, w sposób znaczący zmieniła strukturę demograficzną na omawianym terytorium. Na skutek działań zbrojnych i represji tereny te opuściła znaczna liczba ludności. Istotne również były straty śmiertelne. Kilkakrotnie też zmieniała się przynależność państwowa Wileńszczyzny. Po zajęciu republiki i Wileńszczyzny przez Armię Czerwoną w 1944 r. ostatecznie region ten został włączony do Litewskiej Socjalistycznej Republiki Radzieckiej. W wyniku dwóch fal wyjazdów (w latach 40. i 50.) w nowe granice Rzeczpospolitej, Litwę opuściło łącznie 243 708 osób.

W latach 1959-1989 zostały przeprowadzone cztery spisy ludności. Między nimi zanotowano wzrost liczbowy ludności polskiej z 230,1 tys. do 257 994. Jednocześnie jednak w skali całego kraju nastąpił procentowy spadek o 1,5% - z 8,5% do 7%. Mały wzrost liczby ludności, przy jednoczesnym zmniejszeniu udziału w społeczeństwie, miał dwie przyczyny. Po pierwsze, przesiedlenia negatywnie wpłynęły na strukturę wiekową, gdyż w dużej mierze wyjeżdżali ludzie młodzi. Po drugie, coraz bardziej zarysowywały się procesy asymilacyjne. Odnotowano również zmniejszanie się koncentracji przestrzennej, co wynikało z ruchów migracyjnych ludności polskiej, osadnictwa osób innych narodowości oraz rozwoju terytorialnego Wilna. Na przedwojennym terytorium republiki procesy te miały dynamiczniejszy zakres, doprowadzając do całkowitej marginalizacji społeczności polskiej. Powyższe fakty świadczą o znaczniejszej podatności na czynniki asymilacyjne w sytuacji zamieszkiwania na obszarach o kurczącej się dominacji etnicznej lub w całkowitym rozproszeniu.

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[33] P. Eberhardt, *Przemiany narodowościowe na Litwie*, Warszawa..., p. 232-233.